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ABSTRACT

Online counseling is a growing means of interaction for counselors and clients. This paper presents an interview among three counselors who simultaneously describe and demonstrate skills they use in their e-mail counseling practices. The interviewer and the interviewees all have been involved in the development of online counseling. The skills they have developed for asynchronous text-only communication are relevant to many types of distance therapeutic communication. The interview excerpts contain a discussion of these skills. (JDM)

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by

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September 2001

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E-mail Counseling: Skills for Maximum Impact

Kate Collie, Dan Mitchell, and Lawrence Murphy

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Overview

In July and August of 1999, Kate Collie (KC) conducted an interview with Dan Mitchell (DM) and Lawrence Murphy (LM) on the topic of online counseling skills. The interview was done by e-mail so DM and LM could simultaneously describe and demonstrate skills they use in their e-mail counseling practice.

All three authors have been involved in the development of online counseling. DM and LM began an e-mail counseling and therapy practice in 1995 (Murphy & Mitchell, 1998) and are among the few people who have both practiced online counseling and published on the subject. KC has been involved in the collaborative development of *computer-supported distance art therapy* (Collie & Cubranic, 1999), an art-based form of online counseling that uses synchronous speech communication and shareable hand-drawn computer art.

The skills DM and LM have developed for asynchronous text-only communication are relevant to many types of distance therapeutic communication. The interview excerpt that follows contains a discussion of these skills.

The Interview

KC: Hello, Dan and Lawrence. It is a pleasure to have this opportunity to interview the two of you.

DM: Hi Kate. I'm very excited about this opportunity and want to thank you for the work you're putting in to the interview. Before we begin, let me first prepare myself (explicitly, so you know how I do it) the way I do when replying to my clients. Before I type even my first keystroke, I have only one thing on my mind: express warmth and personal caring. If I were permitted only to say one thing in this interview, it would be that: express warmth and personal caring. To this end, even as I write at this moment, I have pulled up a chair for you and a chair for Lawrence, and placed them beside me. In a similar fashion, I would like to invite our readers to imagine the three of us sitting in chairs in front of them as if they were watching the interview. They may even choose to place three chairs in front of them. Kate, I'm imagining your warm smile, and I feel a sense of anticipation about the insightful questions I know you're about to ask.

KC: Dan, I am amazed. You have certainly conveyed warmth and caring. Beginning this interview, I felt a very matter-of-fact and rational sense of conducting the conversation. However, your words offer me a feeling of closer rapport with you, and I feel more inclined to speak on a more personal level.

LM: Hi Kate. I want to echo Dan's sentiments. It's a pleasure to be involved with you on this project and after reading Dan's initial response, I'm sitting here smiling with anticipation myself.

KC: I'll start now with my first question about communicating with someone you can't see. The lack of nonverbal information is often assumed to be a serious drawback to on-line counseling. In your article in the *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* (Murphy & Mitchell, 1998), you agree that the lack of nonverbal cues presents a challenge, but you explain that you have developed techniques for dealing with this. Two you mention are *emotional bracketing* and *descriptive immediacy*. What is emotional bracketing?

LM: I'll explain emotional bracketing and demonstrate it at the same time [feeling pleased that I thought of this]. This technique is used throughout *therap-e-mails*. When we thought about our face-to-face therapy experiences, it seemed obvious to us that the nonverbal element is [feeling unsure of the wording I want] in the background of our conscious awareness. It takes effort, and indeed training, to be aware of these elements. Once aware, we discover that the nonverbal dimension often communicates emotional material. Sometimes this is congruent with the person's words, sometimes not [now feeling very on track]. In *therap-e-mail*, we discovered that we could compensate for the lack of nonverbals by bracketing the emotional content behind the words. We place, and invite our clients to place, important emotional content (particularly emotional information that we couldn't otherwise glean from the text) in square brackets. Here is an example of what a client might write:

> I have reread your last therap-e-mail several times [feeling stupid again] and although I appreciate your words [can't believe you have such faith in me] I don't think I'm ever going to have a worthwhile relationship [very very sad]. Richard called again to say I'm an idiot [angry with myself]. He's so mean. But, hmm, now that I think about what you said again, I think I'm actually more angry with him than with myself. [Weird. I feel pretty good just now].

KC: Thank you, Lawrence. And what about descriptive immediacy?

LM: Descriptive immediacy is a technique that we use to deepen the connection between client and therapist. We also encourage clients to use it when they feel that it will give us important information. Here is an example of what a therapist might write:

> I have just finished reading your last therap-e-mail, Angie, and my smile is a mile wide. As I think about your successes over guilt I find myself nodding my head and saying the words "you did it, you did it" smiling all the while. If you were here with me now you would see me shrugging my shoulders with my hands in the air, as if to say "well...looks like guilt's power is all burned out". Congratulations Angie.

We use descriptive immediacy in several situations. First, we use it to highlight a moment of intense emotion, any situation in which a simple verbal response is not enough. This may be about a success, as in the example above, or it may be in response to a very painful disclosure. Second, we use it in situations where we might use immediacy face-to-face. An example would be a situation in which the client's words seem incongruent, or contradict a previous *therap-e-mail*. We would use descriptive immediacy to first deepen the intimacy between us before venturing to – even mildly – confront. However, the technique can be used any time the therapist feels that it would be helpful to deepen the bond with a client.

KC: Thanks. Have the two of you developed more techniques since you wrote the *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* article?

DM: Yes, we have! This is the part I find most exciting. Perhaps I can first focus on the appearance of the e-mail itself. Some clients write using 8-point fonts. Others use coloured text with special backgrounds. Still others use the defaults that come with their software. This creates for me something of a first impression – similar to the moment of having a client enter my physical office. From the appearance of the e-mail, I begin to form hypotheses about clients' stories.

Looking more closely at the text itself, I may notice that the client has used the lower case " i" to refer to himself. Could this client be a little bit shy? Possibly. Or I may notice that some words have been misspelled. Does that mean the client was in too much of a rush to check, or does it speak to the client's literacy level? A moment ago, I spelled the word *coloured* using Canadian spelling. If a client had done so, I would wonder whether he or she has British or Canadian origins.

Sometimes clients use ALL CAPS to emphasize a point or even to convey emotion that can be interpreted based on the context. For example, a client may write, "I took your advice and told my mother. I can't believe I ACTUALLY DID IT!" Clearly the client is showing excitement and pride in his or her accomplishment.

Naturally, I can use any of these observations therapeutically as well! For instance, perhaps it is important for me to take a one-down position with a client so that a certain intervention will be effective. i may choose to do so by using lower case "i" and by reducing the size of my font. Or I can use a dash – or a series of dots to denote a pause in my thought process... and thus intensify the point I'm making.

And of course I can use pseudo-words such as *hmmmm* or intentional misspellings such as *oooooohhh* boy. Were you able to hear that long *oooooohhh* in your head?

Hmmm. Stretching the length of words... Isn't that nonverbal communication? [Can you tell I'm feeling a little smug right now?]

Did I just notice a smile creeping over your face, Kate? ...or was that my imagination?

New clients can contact Therapy Online through their web site http://www.therapyonline.ca.

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